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Institutional Infancy

~~You know,~~ Out of continuing experience with institutions I begin to wonder whether they cannot be studied as though they were living things with periods akin to infancy, adolescence, maturity, and senility. Maybe there is a bionomic as well as an economic aspect to every institution. Are there not analogies in young institutions to the ego-centered infant? Has not the young institution like the baby a larger surface relative to its small weight than the adult form? Are there not similar promising incertitudes, the same imperious helplessness, similar short-spanned enthusiasms, and the same high mortality of the infant? The characteristic episodes of many a small human being we summarize in the word infancy. May I indulge a weakness for generalization and draw for you a picture of institutional infancy? Think of it in the cosmic manner. Unleash your admittedly resourceful imagination - unchain your memories - the while taking full advantage of your discreetly faulty memory for names.

Now let us take an institution; you can think of any institution you please, ~~while I speak~~. It might be a new kind of college; it might be a girls' school; it might be an institute of international sociology. But it begins this way.

The will of Mr. X - he's never called "X", he's always called "Mr. X" - leaves \$3,000,000 for ^{an institution} ~~a building~~ to be ^{created} ~~erected~~, and names the board of trustees, consisting of one well-known figurehead and the rest business cronies of the erstwhile X. There are of course intimations of what is known as "a good deal more for endowment," when all the relatives have had their whack at challenging the Old Man's sanity when he was drawing up his will. The trustees hide their dismay behind decorum, but, on being told by people who really know what ought to be done, and after a hear-and-a-half's delay during which they allege that

the estate is being settled (not their minds), choose the well-known Dr. McGillicuddy as the head of the institution-to-be. He is chosen because in a moment of preeve he once wrote three vitriolic articles attacking the existing institutions of the same sort and is therefore known to have Vision. After a year of quiet consultation and being the center of all the congresses he attends, he finally announces a staff of eight, gathered from - all over. Three of the eight know at least one other member of the assembling staff; five are total strangers to each other and to the rest. This of course isn't to mention those who mistook being asked for advice and fully expected to be offered places after an understandable delay. Three of the staff are secured from universities so great that they were on salaries of twenty-nine hundred a year to balance the honor of being attached to so great a university - from which, however, they are detached with singular speed by the mere offer of forty-five hundred plus free transport of the cribs, playpens, oil stoves, Corona typewriters, fireless cookers, book cases and Montgomery wardrobes associated, as you know, with twenty-nine hundred a year.

The building, costing a little more than a million but a good deal more than expected, was to be ready in August, but two strikes postpone the opening till February. That at least saves the institution from giving a garden party on a nascent lawn. A rusty steam roller is therefore the sole ornament upon the grounds for the day of dedication.

Two weeks before the dedication ceremonies Dr. McGillicuddy, with heedless, headlong enthusiasm, received the Press. The result in the Sunday papers was an effusion so fulsome and vainglorious as to be no more than an inextinguishable caricature of the institution and its farsighted Leader -- thus damning the future with the skepticism of those who know and the even more disastrous credulity of those who don't.

At the dedication there are three principal speakers. There is an Outsider who explains and expands the National Need for the New Approach. His address is followed by an Insider who dilates upon the local competency to more than fill the National Need. He is followed by a representative of what is called with beautiful euphemism and grace "a Sister Institution." The real fact is that the sister institution was spotted as the outfit who have been doing it so badly they are going to be shamed into oblivion by Dr. McGillicuddy and his group. But it is believed sportsmanlike to get their good will prior to wiping their eye. Sitting on the platform Dr. McGillicuddy, still shuddering and bewildered by what the Sunday papers did to him, thanks God that the proprieties relieve him from uttering a word. The dedication is then terminated with a prayer by the local rabbi and a benediction by the priest (it being quite understood that the institution is going to be entirely in the hands of Protestants anyhow).

During the first year of the institution's history the best young men in the region enroll upon its lists, reading into the reported size of the endowment their own hopes, and naturally enthralled by the insidious glimpse of vacant seats in a newly painted bandwagon. This galaxy of promising young men causes a murmur of jealousy in neighboring institutions, but is otherwise considered as a hopeful sign.

At the end of three grueling years the situation is about as follows. One of the original staff of eight has already left to become the Chancellor of the University of Kokomo; one has died of a 135 h.p. sports car; two more have found that the institution is not what they thought it was going to be; and another has found, more intelligently, that the institution isn't even what Dr. McGillicuddy thought it was going to be, and furthermore is inclined to doubt whether it ever could have been. That leaves three to be accounted for, which is easily done because they have turned out to be not what Dr. McGillicuddy

thought they'd be; but they have married local girls and are not disposed to leave, partly because there are no inquiries for their services from elsewhere, and partly because they are ineffably remote to self-reproach anyhow. Replacements of the departed ones have been chosen on the basis of availability and with the main view to filling the gaps, and are consequently not given any encouragement to be themselves except during the summer vacation. All turn out, after a hopeful three-year period of grace and delay, to be impeccable duds.

The fifth year Dr. McGillicuddy disappears for a week, but he has actually left for the metropolis with a copy in his new satchel of the Russell Sage publication, ^{"American Foundations for Social Welfare"} ~~"Funds and Foundations in the United States."~~ In quarters you may never even have heard of he describes the institution as being "faced with a challenge," which is ^apedigree for an unmistakable deficit. The end result of the visit is communicated on Dr. McGillicuddy's return only to the Treasurer, because the Treasurer used to be a travelling salesman earlier in life and would understand...No sales - no prospects.

The ninth year is marked by an energetic campaign among the alumni to get representation on the board of trustees, accompanied by unsubstantiated rumors of an alumni fund for the library. But anyone would have known the alumni aren't old enough or ^{wise} ~~rich~~ enough yet to raise a fund for a library - stadium more like.

During the next five years the original trustees all die off, and much time is spent trying to educate their bewildered successors, two bankers and three corporation lawyers, a frightened minister and a high school principal of great natural dignity. In the twelfth year the most forceful member of the original research staff goes off the deep end on his own particular hobby. Beginning by self-pity which is magnificently abetted by a loyal wife, and ending by a delicious blend of truculence and obstructionism, he can be held at bay only by giving him eight rooms in the east wing and separate status as

Director of the McIntyre Research Division of the whole shebang - McIntyre being the father of the wife of one of the trustees who didn't like the U.S. Collector of Internal Revenue and hoped to spite him by giving it away.

The thirteenth year sees Dr. McGillicuddy's sixtieth birthday celebrated by a large testimonial dinner and by the forced erection of a marble gateway to the red brick main building. This is the unswerving, the relentless gift of a local maiden who was once crossed in love and has never been crossed since. It is known as the McGillicuddy Gate.

Three years later begin furtive consultations of a large red volume called "When Is Who in America" to ascertain exactly when Dr. McGillicuddy will be sixty-five. But the Old Man skillfully eludes the obvious by a trip to England in search of a visiting professor, after bestowing, however, an honorary degree on the one trustee who never attended any one of the ¹⁸⁵¹~~1851~~ colleges which speckle this fair land. Where his sixtieth birthday was passed in cheers, McGillicuddy's sixty-eighth birthday is observed in whispers. At sixty-nine he espouses the fond doctrine "never resign under pressure." He reaches seventy-one before the youngest trustee cleverly discovers that in one more year McGillicuddy will have ^{completed}~~made~~ what is known as a "Quarter Century of Service." So the mildest trustee is chosen to bell the cat; and after a year of uninterrupted rumors, surmises, and alarms, Hisketh McIntosh - one of the first graduates, and with too little known about him to have any informed opponents - is chosen to succeed President McGillicuddy, since no one but a graduate could have an idea by now what the Institution really stands for. And at that moment, gentlemen, institutional infancy as I understand it is over.

My time, gentlemen, is limited - too limited to portray the characteristics of the groping adolescence, or the deep-chested maturity, or the bent old age of institutions. But rest assured that such studies could be made, for nosography is a neglected but a rewarding branch of knowledge.